



Write And Delete

To generate ideas through writing, students should pose a question and begin answering it.

Let Yourself Stretch

As we know from reading student essays, the first few sentences will likely be weak. For example, if you ask students to address how Erik Erikson's theories shaped contemporary understandings of child development, the first sentences students write – regardless of their age or level – will likely look something like this:

“Erik Erikson was an important, influential, and well-known psychologist. His ideas shaped current thinking about psychology in a huge range of ways. So many of these ways have changed the way we think about child development today and led to massive innovations in approaches to childhood.” And so on.

Some students might begin even more broadly:

“Psychology as a field has been around for centuries. Many important psychologists have contributed to this field. One of them, Erik Erikson, was especially influential in shaping how people think about childhood and child development.”

We might call these familiar openings “stretching.” Like runners who stretch before a race, writers stretch our brains by beginning with clunky, meaningless, vague, or repetitive sentences and deleting them later in the process. Remind students that, just as they wouldn't want people observing an awkward stretching routine, so they should remove these “brain stretches” before submitting a final draft.

Don't Delete Too Soon!

The trick here is to keep writing, well past the bad ideas and at least through one paragraph that feels more concrete, substantive, and purposeful; at that point, it's fine to go back and delete the bad stuff at the beginning. If students write a bad sentence and erase, write a bad sentence and erase, they are more likely to continue writing bad sentences and feel frustrated with their inability to get started.



Students may not know what to write at first, but if you ask them to just keep writing, even if they are repeating themselves or writing nonsense, they will likely come to some answers that can be mined for their actual essays.

An Important Caveat

A strict minimum page requirement prevents students from erasing their writing, even meaningless writing. Therefore, give students a range – “this essay should be approximately four to six pages long” – rather than an absolute minimum – “this essay must be no fewer than three pages long.” Most of us would rather read quality work than work of a certain length!